

Falls Aren't Funny for Maryland's Seniors

Falls Prevention Week in Maryland

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Department of Health & Mental Hygiene News Release

Baltimore, MD (September 22, 2010) — Falls send more Marylanders over age 65 to the emergency room each year than any other type of injury, according to Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DHMH) data. In 2007, a daily average of 63 Marylanders aged 65 and older were treated in an emergency department for a fall, and another 38 were hospitalized for the same reason, at a cost of \$120 million.

"When Chevy Chase would fall on Saturday Night Live, we all laughed because we knew he would get back up again," said, John M. Colmers, DHMH Secretary. "The reality is that one serious fall can threaten the independence and quality of life for many people, especially our vulnerable seniors."

While younger Marylanders who take a spill are likely to sustain more embarrassment than injury, for seniors, falls are no laughing matter. Falls can cause major injuries like hip fractures, which can lead to permanent disability, long-term hospital or nursing home stays, or even death. Hospitalizations alone cost the state over \$120 million.

Seniors who take one tumble are two to three times more likely to fall again, according to DHMH data. After a fall, older adults tend to become less active for fear of falling again.

Not surprisingly, falls are a strong predictor for placement in a skilled nursing facility.

Ruth Leibowitz is an active, independent 86-year-old Maryland woman who knows firsthand the danger of falls for older adults. She experienced a major fall in 2009 after suffering minor injuries from earlier falls.

"I sustained a cervical spine fracture and had to wear a neck brace for three months, said Leibowitz. "I couldn't drive. I had to rely on my daughter to drive me to appointments and take me shopping," she said. The only thing I could do by myself was walk to a nearby store for small items. I felt so helpless."

Leibowitz' recovery was a long and difficult process. "I had to have physical therapy after my neck brace was removed," she said. I had to learn how to move around again and do things for myself."

The experience has changed Leibowitz' outlook. "I used to do things quickly. Now I move slower and I am more careful," she said. "I don't walk outside as much because I'm afraid I might trip over uneven sidewalks and curbs. And I definitely don't want to fall again!"

"The good news about falls is that many of them are preventable," said Frances Phillips, DHMH Deputy Secretary for Public Health. "The major risk factors for falls in older adults are lack of exercise, vision problems, medication side effects, and home hazards. These are all controllable."

There are four basic steps you can take to reduce your risk of falls:

- **Begin a regular exercise program.** Exercise improves strength and balance, as well as coordination.

- **Have your health care provider review your medicines.** Some medicines or combinations of medicines can make you sleepy or dizzy and cause you to fall.
- **Have your vision checked.** Have your eyes checked by an eye doctor at least once a year. Poor vision can increase your chances of falling.
- **Make your home safer.** Remove tripping hazards like books and papers from stairs. Remove small throw rugs or use double-sided tape to hold them in place. Install grab bars next to your toilet and shower.

For more information about how to prevent falls, contact DHMH's Office of Injury Prevention and Health Promotion at 410-767-6779 or visit [FALLS](#). Data available at MATCH – Maryland Assessment Tool for Community Health - www.matchstats.org